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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT OSCAR ARIAS'S INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF MAY  
8, 2006

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¶1. On being presented the presidential sash on May 8, 2006, Oscar Arias delivered his inaugural speech entitled, "I Choose Life, Democracy and the Challenge of Peaceful Change." Below is the full text of the speech in English. The translation was provided by the Arias Foundation, an NGO founded by Oscar Arias after being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987. See reftel for Embassy's summary and analysis of the speech.

¶2. Bgin Text:

Honorable heads of state; esteemed memers of the Supreme Authorities of Costa Rica, official government representatives; winners of the Nobel Prize for Peace, my dear friends:

We hae come here today to celebrate an act that renews ur faith in the creed of democracy and in the spiit of the people of Costa Rica. Today, once more a President whom Costa Ricans freely elected wil transfer his authority to another President wh was also chosen through the votes of our citizens. And just as the repetitive nature of the sun,s rise every morning does not detract from the miracle of light, the repetition of this ceremony does not diminish its value, but rather confirms its transcendent character.

This act embodies the most profound truths our nation has learned, truths to which we are guardians and heirs. Today we relive the beautiful historical journey of this nation, which over the course of almost two centuries has built a way of life defined by love of liberty and solidarity, respect for our institutions and complete dedication to living in peace.

Today we confirm that whatever challenges we confront as a society, whatever disputes temporarily separate us, the people who call this country their home are determined to live under the one political system that makes possible the peaceful transition of power, equal justice under law, and the basic right of all human beings to define their own destiny. This is the creed that this nation professes.

Today more than ever we should anchor ourselves to the values that encourage and sustain us. These convictions\*especially the conviction that it is possible to construct societies that are ever more just, without extremism and in peace\*are the only ones capable of guiding us in these turbulent times.

These are times of change, and times of definition. As human beings, as Latin Americans and as Costa Ricans we cannot afford the luxury of indecision. We have reached a crossroads and we must make decisions.

As human beings, we cannot blindly trust the immense scientific and technological changes of our era to

automatically resolve the great dilemmas of humankind. We cannot trust them to preserve our planet, increasingly threatened by greed and lack of foresight. We cannot trust them to make possible the peaceful coexistence of civilizations, civilizations which are increasingly endangered by political and religious fundamentalism and by the weakening of international law. We cannot trust them to promote the principle that we are all children of God and equal in His eyes. This principle is undermined by rising levels of inequality on a global scale, and by certain outcroppings of misery that continue to be incompatible with all we claim to profess.

None of these problems will resolve themselves, because it is clear that neither economic progress nor scientific progress necessarily entails ethical progress on the part of humanity. Ethical progress is not inevitable. We cannot wait for it like we wait for the passing of a comet. It requires that we desire it and build it with all our strength.

As Latin Americans we must decide if we are to continue seeking utopias and blaming others for our misfortune, or if, on the contrary, we will acknowledge that our destiny depends on what we do today to create societies that are better educated, more productive, more just, and more dedicated to building solid institutions than to listening to the passionate words of politicians.

We must decide, for what we have today is a Latin America that is confused about its role and its relevance in the world, that is less and less definite in its adherence to fundamental democratic values. The great historical achievement of the current generation of Latin Americans ) that of having left behind the interminable night of military rule) is beginning to founder, in part because of the

refusal of our political elite to confront the secular afflictions of inequality and exclusion, and in part because of the chronic incapacity of many of our politicians and intellectuals to see the world as it is, and not as they wish it were; because of their incapacity to read the world in prose and not in poetry.

We must decide, then, if the democratic adventure which the region launched in the past three decades will be only a parenthesis of rationality in a history marked by intolerance, violence, and frustration, or if it will be the beginning of our long-postponed journey to modernity and development.

But it is, above all, as Costa Ricans that we must make decisions. For years, out of fear and out of convenience, we have been postponing the solutions to our most pressing problems. We have preferred to believe, against all evidence, that not deciding does not carry any cost and that the indisputable achievements that we have realized as a society guarantee our success in perpetuity.

We have chosen to adopt indecision as a way of confronting life. For many years now, we as a country have lost our energy and direction, and on a steep path this can only result in backsliding.

We have gone as far as this route can take us. We cannot continue wandering without a compass, discussing endlessly among ourselves, pursuing the mirage of unanimity, consuming the best of our days and our efforts as if time did not exist, as if the march of history had stopped to wait for little Costa Rica to decide someday to lift anchor.

"If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favorable," Seneca correctly wrote. I am convinced that Costa Rica has all that it needs to arrive at a proposed destination, but first it must know where it wants to go.

That is the task that begins today: that of defining a course for Costa Rica and beginning to sail towards it.

If we must define this course, it is necessary that we recover the courage to agree; the capacity to recognize the opportunities that we have; the humility to know that our vision of the world is not the only one; and the nobility to place the interests of the country above our personal interests.

We must recover the wisdom to discern what is essential and what is secondary in our nationality; to separate those traditions and values that are worth conserving in this search for our destiny from those that have simply become heavy burdens.

Above all, we must recover our disposition to innovate, to change, to explore new paths. And in this, it seems to me, we are agreed: for all of the political and social sectors in the country the status quo has ceased to be an option.

From this day forward, Costa Rica must recover the confidence that it has all it needs to move forward, that it can think on a grand scale and look to the future, beyond the small disputes that today consume our energies. It is time that we return to having a historic purpose worthy of our exceptional past.

That, friends, is the mission that we have: that Costa Rica might once again see the future with optimism, that it might again believe in itself, that it might become convinced that it can change.

That is what we must do and that is what we will do.

From this day forward we will forge a clear path in the struggle against poverty and inequality.

We will not remain passive before the pain of millions of Costa Ricans living in misery. We will not remain passive before the social chasms that today divide the Costa Rican family. We will not remain passive before the discrimination suffered by the most vulnerable groups in our society, in particular the disabled, the elderly, ethnic minorities, children and single mothers.

We will renew this country's fidelity to its best traditions, traditions that have understood the expansion of human opportunities as the underlying thread of history's great adventure. Such is the legacy of solidarity bequeathed by Flix Arcadio Montero, Omar Dengo, Alfredo Gonzalez Flores, Jorge Volio, Manuel Mora, Rafael Angel Calderon

Guardia, Jos Figueres, and all of those who throughout our

history have helped us to understand that Costa Rica is not simply a group of individuals, but a community and a family that must never abandon its weakest members to fate.

The social policies of this administration will emphasize the strengthening of universal public services, above all education and health care provided by the Costa Rican Social Security system. These must continue to be supported by all Costa Ricans, for the benefit of all Costa Ricans.

We will work to coordinate anti-poverty programs, making possible a clear and progressive assignment of social investment, and a rigorous evaluation of its results.

We must understand that effective social policy cannot be created in a vacuum: it takes significant resources. Therefore, I want to emphasize the following: in this administration we will resolve the state's perennial fiscal crisis, making possible the social investments that Costa Rica needs.

We cannot advance towards the future without a great qualitative and quantitative boost in social investment. Without it, we will have neither development, nor social justice, nor peace. The creation of an appropriate, progressive tax system is vital for our future.

From this day forward, we will forge a clear path for the productive sector of Costa Rica.

We will promote policies for sustained improvements in competitiveness; for a gradual opening of the economic structure; for the sustainability of our productive processes; and for an intelligent alignment with the global economy. We will not resign ourselves to watch impotently while this country slips ever lower in the most important measures of competitiveness.

We will strive towards the most important goal that any economic policy can have: the creation of more and better jobs for Costa Ricans, and especially for youth. Beyond social policy, our first task in reducing poverty in Costa Rica is to stimulate the creation of formal jobs in the private sector.

Likewise, we will reform and appropriately regulate the telecommunications, infrastructure and energy sectors to make them internationally competitive. Our efforts will immediately turn to the formation of an integral energy policy, one that reduces our dependence on fossil fuels and promotes the use of renewable energy sources. Costa Rica must rethink the current energy model, for its continuation would be nothing less than a grave risk to our future economic growth.

We will deepen Costa Rica's ties to the world economy. We will continue to vigorously attract foreign investment and to be resolute in our commercial policy, which permits the greatest number of Costa Rican producers to integrate into export markets.

Turning our backs on economic integration, returning to commercial protectionism, and disdaining the attraction of foreign investment at this time constitute the surest ways to condemn Costa Rica's youth to unemployment and Costa Rica to underdevelopment. They also constitute the surest ways to waste the human and institutional capital that the country has accumulated over the past 50 years and that has allowed us to successfully integrate ourselves into the global economy.

In this, I want to be very clear: sovereignty is not defended with prejudices and slogans, but rather, with work and concrete plans for creating prosperity in Costa Rica. A country that is afraid of the world and is not able to adapt to it inexorably condemns its youth to seek a livelihood beyond its borders. If it does this, it is less sovereign, less just and less of a country.

Favoring the isolation of Costa Rica from the great phenomena of the modern world is a reactionary cause and a betrayal of our youth. It will not be my government that, out of fear and prejudice, isolates Costa Rica from the international economy.

From this day forward we will chart a clear course for public education. This should once again be one of the motors of our productivity, an instrument for reducing inequalities and reproducing our best values.

Over the next four years, we will spare no effort to dedicate

8% of Gross Domestic Product to educational investment. We are going to work to ensure that the profession of educator is well compensated so that our educational system attracts sharper and sharper minds with a greater focus on service.

Above all, we are going to work every day to universalize secondary education, providing economic support from the state to the poorest families so they keep their adolescent children in the classrooms. We will not allow the lack of access to education to reproduce, generation after generation, an infernal cycle of misery.

We will chart a clear course on fighting crime and drugs. We are going to be tough on crime, but even tougher on the causes of crime. We are going to take a close look at the preventative orientation of the police force and we will provide it with more resources.

We will improve the mechanisms for reporting crime, and, in particular, for reporting domestic violence, the most insidious and widespread type of crime.

We will fight without rest against drug trafficking. And not just large-scale drug trafficking ) the kind that requires us to patrol our seas and our airports ) but especially the small-scale trafficking of drugs, which occurs on corners in our neighborhoods, in parks in our communities, in doorways and halls at our high schools. That will be one of the main priorities in terms of the security of our citizens.

Starting today we will chart a clear course for our efforts to modernize the state. We will focus urgently on the task of providing the country with agile, efficient and transparent institutions that will support the pursuits of our citizens rather than undermine them; that will be instruments of, and not obstacles to, democratic governance.

We will chart a clear course for national investment in infrastructure and transportation. Nevermore will our highways, ports and airports be a cause of national embarrassment; nevermore will our producers be condemned to pass through a nightmare in order to sell the fruits of their labor; nevermore will our most remote rural communities be relegated to isolation and underdevelopment.

From this day forward, we chart a clear course for our foreign policy. We return Costa Rica to its leading role in the international theater. Our foreign policy will be based on principles and values deeply rooted in Costa Rican history: defense of democracy, full promotion and protection of human rights, the struggle for global peace and disarmament; and commitment to human development.

We will again align our foreign policy with the peaceful ways of the Costa Rican people. We will defend multilateralism, we will strictly adhere to International Law and the founding principles of the United Nations Charter\*the most fundamental safeguard against anarchy in the world.

As a country without an army, starting today we call on the world, especially industrialized nations, to come together so that, together, we might give life to the Costa Rican Consensus. With this initiative, we seek the establishment of mechanisms to forgive debts and provide international financial resources to developing countries that invest more and more in health, education, and housing for their people, and less and less in weapons and soldiers. It is time that the international financial community reward not just those who use resources prudently, as has been the case until now, but those who use resources morally.

Along these same lines, starting now, the protection of the environment and of the right to sustainable development will become a priority of our foreign policy. Our goal is that Costa Rica,s name becomes synonymous with basic human values: love of peace and love of nature. That will be our distinguishing mark as a country. That will be our calling card to the world.

I have left my most important commitment for last. Starting today, there will be a clear and unalterable path of honesty in public office.

This ethical path means speaking to Costa Ricans with honesty - always telling them what they should know, and not just what they want to hear. I have not arrived at this position to please any particular group, but rather to defend the interests of Costa Rican society as a whole, according to my

abilities to understand them given my human limitations. I could err in my decisions, and surely I will many times, but I will never say or do anything with any criteria except

this: the wellbeing of my country.

This ethical path means keeping campaign promises, a minimum requirement for Costa Ricans to believe in politics again. It means being accountable to citizens for all of our actions, as difficult as that may sometimes be. It means requiring the highest level of integrity and accountability from our partners. It means understanding the Presidency not as an opportunity to seek glory or popularity, but as a space to serve those who are most in need.

This, friends, is the path that Costa Rica embarks on today.

I would like to think that the path that I have outlined will inevitably result in a more prosperous Costa Rica for our children. I would like to think that the Presidential sash I wear is the talisman that will make it possible for us to arrive at the bicentennial of our independence as a developed nation. But there is no certainty in this\*there are only possibilities.

I think that a good part of success will depend on the political maturity we demonstrate at this crucial time, on our high mindedness, on our willingness to devote ourselves to basic rules of civility, without which no form of democracy is possible.

For all of the political parties and social organizations of the country, I today have a message that is also a request. A request that we might work together for our future. A request that we might learn that no party and no organization has a monopoly on honesty, on patriotism, on good intentions, and on love for Costa Rica. A request that we might understand that the responsible exercise of political power is much more than pointing fingers, denouncing, and obstructing, and that it consists, above all, in carrying out dialogue, in collaborating, and in building. A request that we might know how to distinguish between adversaries and enemies; that we might understand that a willingness to compromise is not a sign of weakness, just as intransigence is not a sign of strength. A request that we might cast aside the meanness of our political debate; that we might raise our heads, look forward, and think in grand terms.

Only thus will we meet the grave responsibilities that we have before us as public officials, as political leaders, as social leaders, or simply as citizens.

Friends:

The rare privilege of living in a critical moment in history, when the old still has not died and the new still has not been born, has been given to us. At this crossroads, humanity must choose whether it will eliminate all forms of poverty or all forms of life on the planet.

We Latin Americans must choose whether we will nourish, with knowledge and patience, the democratic flower that has taken root or crush it beneath the weight of stale prejudices and our legendary tolerance of injustice.

We Costa Ricans must choose whether we will take our destiny in our hands, whether we will take advantage of our opportunities and create a prosperous country in which there is a dignified place for all, or whether, on the contrary, we will resign ourselves to seeing the world pass by at a distance, to squandering the achievements that we have accumulated, and to living, like that downfallen family in a tale of Jorge Luis Borges, "in the resentment and insipidness of poor decency."

All these paths are open, but the time in which we have to

decide is not great. For my part, I choose life, democracy, and the challenge of changing in peace. It is time that humanity, Latin America, and Costa Rica change, not by chance, but out of conviction; not because there is no other path, but because it is the correct one.

With humility I ask all Costa Ricans ) men and women, young and old, of all political persuasions and religious creeds ) to accompany me in this undertaking. I am only the director that you have freely and temporarily chosen for this collective work that we begin today. But I clearly recognize that the actors and the protagonists, today, tomorrow, and always, will be you.

I ask all Costa Ricans to respond to fear with optimism; to powerlessness with enthusiasm; to paralysis with dynamism; to apathy with commitment; to small-mindedness with unbreakable faith in the bright future of Costa Rica.

And to God Almighty I ask that, with his infinite wisdom, He might guide our steps in this new era as we continue to build our beautiful and indestructible nation.

Thank you very much.

End text.

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